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Worldly Things: Poetry and Propaganda In America

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

Everyone knows what happens to the poets. Unworthy of trust, posing an inconceivable threat to the youth, they are thrown out of the city. They are exiled to a land reserved for the frivolous, the misguided, and those who cannot be saved by the antidote of knowledge. Supposedly the temptation of the poets' charm is real. A poem, like monetary bribes or political power, can lead one morally astray (Plato and Bloom 608c). And although these accusations appear harsh, this assault on poetry is just the beginning. The rhapsodist Ion arrives to a particular gathering in Athens only to be reminded that, although he is indeed charming, he will never be one of the 'wise men' (Plato 1: 542). In *The Republic* poetry is depicted like a disease, as if verse were "a species of mental poison, and the enemy of the truth" (Havelock 4). This blatant moral indictment of poetry poses the question of why, exactly, the poets are so despised by Socrates and his followers. What could Ion have possibly done to be so severely shunned?

First, one must gauge how literally they want to interpret this transgression against poetry. Despite the "whole spirit and tenor of the argument" is it possible that Socrates does not mean what he says (9)? Whether or not Socrates meant what he said, there is an obvious attack launched against poetry. An indisputable line is drawn in-between the poets and the philosophers. What remains after the battle is that the poets are "exposed and expelled from the discipline that must reign over the philosophic stage of instruction" (14). What is at stake is fundamental to the conception of citizenship, and the role poetry plays in our public lives.

The poets begin on a bad note. At the very root of the western canon there is a political antagonism towards poetry. Of course, this attitude towards poetry has since changed. In modern America this ancient dispute seems completely unfounded. Each year, accomplished poets receive various awards and endowments. The concern is that, be it centuries later, a slight bias towards the poetic has remained. A degree of tension exists between poets and politicians, and this tension is present in our national history. When the government appropriates the written work of poets to their benefit it is unsettling. Even those events which some might reflect over with fondness, such as Robert Frost's reading at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, are slightly awkward. Perhaps the poet's place is not behind the presidential podium. In a different episode years later, Robert Lowell rejects President Johnson's invitation to read at the White House Arts Festival (Flanzbaum 44). These moments in history are a reminder that poetry's role in politics is limited. The poet either offers endorsement or exemplifies resistance. As powerful as these responses may be, they are limited in so far as poetry only comments or responds, and is not considered fundamentally part of the public sphere.

This sentiment regarding poetry is only complimented by Auden's infamous statement that "...poetry makes nothing happen" (Auden 40). Could it be true that poetry does not have a place in the political realm at all?

Denied the power to catalyze, poetry, in this view, ascends the inert nobility reserved for elements that cannot combine. A poem, after all, is usually written by an individual and read by individuals. Poems seem the

worst possible avenues for political action. They are personal, interior, walled off by form and function from the world of practical politics. And those assumptions set in place a seductive corollary: poems that try to make something happen in the direct way that Auden rules out in his elegy are bad. So poetry cannot do political work, and when it tries to, it is doomed to (poetic and political) failure. (Thurston 7).

This statement presents a false, albeit seductive, dichotomy between the poetic and the political. Poetry is associated with the emotional, the politically passive, and the interior self. By default the political realm negates the emotional, cherishes the rational, and complements the active and exterior self. If we take this dichotomy to be true, then perhaps poetry is not politically relevant.

The problem with the entirety of this assumed division, however, is that it demands a devastatingly narrow view of both politics and poetry. There is no good reason to define both the poetic and the political, or the interior and exterior self, in so far as they negate each other. If defining the political still demands a refusal of the poetic, then perhaps it is time to reconsider what the public sphere is. More so, blatantly accepting poetry's passive role in the political realm should be of concern to anyone who does not treat *The Republic* as a personal utopia. It may be true that poets are not meant to provide man with a moral education, or recite their verse behind a presidential podium. They are not philosophers or politicians. They are, after all, poets. This does not mean, however, that they are not of the world.

The first chapter of this project begins with the world itself. The interwar period in America marked the beginning of a new national consciousness. Producers effectively utilized advertising to increase product demand, in order to counteract the decrease in production levels associated with the end of World War I. Advertising methods that were formerly used to create propaganda in support of the war were employed for the benefit of the private sector. Central to the development of this new era of consumerism was the myth of a democratic free market. The effects of this agenda, however, permanently changed how Americans conceived of their own democracy. Two critical moments in history that encapsulate the development of consumerism in America, the 1939 World's Fair held in New York, and the publication of an advertisement for Mosler Safes later in the century. These two events begin to paint a picture of an American world where the interior self, specifically what Freud came to name as the unconscious, was manipulated by advertisements to reshape public life. This collapse between the public and private sector in modern America is best described by borrowing Arendt's terminology, specifically her understanding of the social realm. The exterior self became defined by material objects, rather than the phenomena of appearing in the public. Ultimately, the American citizen was redefined as the American consumer.

The second chapter of this project will examine Arendt's conception of the world. The foundation of the man made world, as described in *The Human Condition*, are products of work. The conflation of use-objects with consumer goods in modern times poses a threat to the very world men share and live in. More so, the world is a space where public experience occurs. The trademark characteristic of the social realm in

modern times for Arendt is world-alienation. The development of advertising in America not only replaced the citizen with the consumer, but alienated the individual from the world around them. Faced with the devastating effects of world alienation, the question of how to re-engage with the world arises.

The third chapter of this project suggests that poetry is essentially of, and for, the world. In modern America, the work of both Robert Lowell and W.H. Auden exemplify this. In order for a poem to be of the world, must it directly confront the political climate of its time? While the work of poets such as Robert Lowell directly confronts the public sphere, Auden questioned the validity of poetry's role in politics. Differences aside, the work of both poets question whether or not poetry is truly able to offer reconciliation with the difficulties of public life. Is the gift of poetry precisely its distance from politics, so that it is able to shed a new light on the public realm, a light which shows poetry's very inability to change the world? Is this true, where does this place poetry in the public realm?

Chapter I

Historical Context: The Citizen Becomes a Consumer

On April 30 1939, the gates of the New York World's Fair opened. The organization and execution of the fair was a concerted effort between the public sector, the private sector, and the press. At news stands across the nation *The New York Times* headlined: "1,000,000 To See Fair Opening; President To Speak at 2 P.M.; Fleet Here, Visitors Pour In" ("1,000,000 To See Fair"). It is more than likely that this headline was not too unfamiliar to the fair organizers themselves, as one of the leading men in the publicity department formerly worked for the *Times* (Lichtenberg 316). Roosevelt himself only complimented the grandeur of the event as he dedicated the fair to "all of mankind" ("New York" 00:00:47). Politicians, businessmen, and journalists alike relished in the extravagance of the event. The World's Fair symbolized how America conceived of itself and its future. Central to this vision was a world where a democratic free market reigned.

The architecture of the World's Fair conveyed a symbolic union between business and government, between a free market and democratic ideals. While planning the fair, the president of the Institute of Public Relations published a short article stating that the fair would not be concerned with selling products, but rather selling ideas (Lichtenberg 314). Similarly, the architects of the fair were aware of the influence they had over public opinion. They saw themselves as "...lay[ing] the foundation for a pattern of life which will have an enormous effect in times to come" (Kargon et al. 62). Of the many ideas being sold to the general public, various exhibitions at the fair flaunted the importance of

technological progress. The fair suggested that industrial and technological advancement in the nation demanded a thriving free market. The result of this would be a ‘pattern of life’ beneficial to the American public.

This union between democracy and a free market is best exemplified in the fair’s architecture. Traditionally imperialistic designs were employed by architects to cherish principles of American democracy. A promotional photograph of the fair shows four 30ft high statues, titled ‘speech’, ‘press’, ‘assembly’, and ‘religion’, looking over a reconstructed constitutional mall (Fig. 1). In addition to this, the gaze of a “heroic 65ft statue of George Washington” looked down over the mall (“1939 New York” 00:01:46). The statue of President Washington suggests a paternal guidance watching over the principles of democracy. This maintenance of democratic ideals is portrayed as being the job of glorified presidents, rather than the responsibility of citizens themselves.



Fig. 1. *Four Freedoms.*

The imperialistic architecture of the fair culminated in the centerpieces of the fair, the Trylon and the Perisphere (Fig.1). The Trylon is a three sided obelisk reminiscent of

an architecturally imperialistic history, one that begins in ancient Egypt but comes to political fruition during the Roman Empire. Even without the historical context in mind, the Trylon's placement represents a culmination of leaders and democratic values so great that it pierces the sky itself, to infinity. Inside the Perisphere the exhibit called "Democracy" displayed the ideal American lifestyle in years to come. Central to this vision were expansive highways, skyscrapers, and automobiles. From a birds-eye view visitors could look down a world blessed by consumer goods and industrial advancements. The combination of the Trylon with the Perisphere conveys a fusion of imperialistic power, democratic values, and industrial growth.

Indeed, as Lichtenberg noted, the fair was concerned with selling ideas. Large corporations, such as IBM and Ford Motors, built expansive displays that sympathized with the values depicted in the "Democracy" exhibit. Upon visiting the fair Walter Lippmann remarked,

"General Motors has spent a small fortune to convince the American public that if it wished to enjoy the full benefit of private enterprise in motor manufacturing it will have to rebuild its cities and highways by public enterprise. Soon one comes away feeling . . . that both are necessary and that their collaboration is indispensable." (Kargon et al. 78)

The 'collaboration' between private and public enterprise and which Lippmann recognizes at the World's Fair is ultimately distilled in the message that a thriving democracy demands a free market. The World's Fair of 1939 was constructed and

eventually, however, the expansive displays were taken down. What was the reason for such an aggressive attempt to change public opinion?

The construction of the World's Fair was primarily influenced by economic and political conditions (Kargon et al. 58). Ten years earlier Americans had been devastated by the Great Depression. The election of President Roosevelt and the implementation of The New Deal threatened the profits of corporations that had previously thrived in an unregulated market. In response, corporations sought to influence public opinion to their own economic advantage. The World's Fair serves as an example of a larger, more expansive campaign that sold ideas to the public for the benefit of private enterprise. Private corporations portrayed an image of companionship between the private and public sectors precisely because they feared the opposite would be realized.

What distinguishes successful propaganda from mere advertising is what distinguishes the consumption of ideas from the consumption of products. Thus, the World's Fair was an exercise in the possibilities of propaganda. While the organizers may have preferred the term 'public relations' to propaganda, the two terms are interchangeable.¹ A public relations counselor writes,

[The World's Fair] is a great parade of news, publicity, propaganda! And what will be the result of it? The New York World's Fair of 1939 will be the medium through which industry- business large and small- is

¹ Edward Bernays states: "When I got back to the United States I decided that if you could use propaganda for war you could certainly use it for peace. And propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans using it, so what I did was to try to find some other word. So we found the word Council on Public Relations" ("Edward Bernays" 00:00:30).

determined to tell its story and to present its case to the public. If that story is told simply, clearly, entertainingly, and in good humor, industry will have done more to justify itself as a factor in this civilization than it ever has done before. And this justification can result in a tremendous wave of good will. That is why the New York Fair seems destined to become the greatest single public relations program in all history. (Lichtenberg 320)

In this statement, the entirety of the fair is equated with propaganda. Although the story that the corporations are described as selling to the general public is not explicitly stated, the result of the story justifies the importance of private enterprise in the public realm. A critical reading of the World's Fair clarifies what the story Lichtenberg refers to is. A successful World's Fair would accomplish selling to the American people the narrative of an ideal relationship between the private and public sectors, ideal in so far as the market remained unregulated.

By no coincidence, one of the chief strategists behind the World's Fair was Edward Bernays, who founded the first Council on Public Relations. Before his work at the World's Fair, Bernays worked under President Wilson with the Creel Committee during the World War I (Lissner 272). This success in the political world would later be mirrored by an even greater rise for Bernays into America's corporate elite. Ultimately, the work of Bernays and the development of public relations in America marked the beginning of a new era of propaganda. Corporations no longer employed traditional advertising techniques to appeal to consumers, but rather sought to control consumer trends by changing public opinion.

By his supporters, Bernays is acclaimed for revolutionizing and reforming marketing practices. Will Lissner, supporter of Bernays, writes in *The New York Times* that "... Dr. Bernays has improved the images of his clients: by establishing scientifically how a company or other entity can work together with its publics so as to achieve the common goals of democratic society" (272). In other words, Lissner claims that Bernays was able to find a balanced harmony between the goals of both the private and the public sectors. What is of concern in Lissner's statement is how closely it echoes the very idea that the World's fair sought to sell. Specifically, Lissner reiterates the notion that business and government must work together for the benefit of the American public, that a free market is central to a thriving democracy. While Lissner sees this as the goal of public relations councils, these same councils saw this narrative as the very idea they needed to sell. Lissner's innocent reiteration of the myth only proves how deeply influential Bernays' work was, and still is.

From his critics, Bernays is accused of manipulating the American public for the profit and protection of the elite. In his documentary "The Century of the Self" Adam Curtis provides a scathing review of Bernays' work. Curtis rightfully points out how Bernays utilized his less than comprehensive knowledge of psychoanalysis to "...link mass produced goods to [the public's] unconscious desires" (Curtis 00:01:30). By appealing to the private desires of Americans, public relation councils could control consumer trends. Paul Maser openly states how propaganda "...must shift America from a needs to a desires culture ... we must shape a new mentality in America, man's desires must overshadow his needs" (00:16:29). The cultural shift that Maser describes demands the unconscious desires of Americans be manipulated. Integral to the achievement of this

cultural change and the resulting economic success was that the market remain unregulated. The myth that the free market is democratic slowly became engrained in American culture throughout the later half of the twentieth century. However, upon closer analysis, it becomes clear that there is no inherent relationship between an unregulated market and a well functioning democracy.

The Cancer Stage of Capitalism critiques the modern conflation a free market with an unregulated one. McMurtry begins debunking the myth that an unregulated market is free by drawing a striking comparison between a truly free market and the modern equivalent. He writes,

The real free market is made up of ordinary people meeting in a publicly owned space ... and selling what they have made or grown. The goods are generally foodstuffs... with personally made handicrafts... The articles for sale serve a need, not artificially contrived and ad-stimulated wants.

People walk within a community space without blacktop expressways and fossil fuel machines walling their lives in. Creation of desire ...does not deform minds. (112)

A truly free market would not permit the ‘desires’ based culture that Maser describes. McMurtry suggests a trademark characteristic of unregulated markets is the replacement of individual transactions with advertisements (114). Through advertising, the financial elite mastered the “art of control and deception” for no end other than their financial profit (126). What constitutes a free market is in fact regulation, so that “no one from outside the market can get rich from producing nothing for it” (112). Not only does the

term ‘free’ misrepresent an unregulated market, but a truly free market operates in absolute contrast to an unregulated one.

The term ‘free market’ originated when classical theorists critiqued the lack of regulation in the feudal system. Michael Hudson captures how the “privatization” of the market in modern America is actually...

... contrary to what classical economists meant by a free market. They envisioned a market free from rent payed to a hereditary landlord class, and free from interest and monopoly rent paid to private owners. The ideal system was a morally fair market in which people would be rewarded for their labor and enterprise ... (15)

In Hudsons analysis, there is an important distinction between ‘free’ and ‘free from’. He notes how classical economists did not seek a market ‘free’ for the financially elite but a market ‘free from’ the power of their wealth. The concept of a free market originated to defend the freedom of the consumer, not the producer. The privatized and unregulated market of mid-twentieth century America is not in fact free at all.

To claim that an unrelated market is free not only misrepresents the consumers experience, which lacks freedom of choice, but additionally misconceives of economic growth as byproduct of political freedom. Arendt writes,

When we were told that by freedom we understood free enterprise, we did very little to dispel this monstrous falsehood.... Wealth and economic well-being, we have asserted, are the fruits of freedom, while we should have been the first to know that this kind of ‘happiness’ was the blessing of America prior to the

Revolution, and that its cause was natural abundance under ‘mild government’, and neither political freedom nor the unchained, unbridled ‘private initiative’ of capitalism, which in the absence of natural wealth has led everywhere to unhappiness and mass poverty. Free enterprise, in other words, ... is a minor blessing compared with the truly political freedoms, such as freedom of speech and thought, of assembly and association, even under the best conditions.

Economic growth may one day turn out to be a curse rather than a good, and under no conditions can it either lead into freedom or constitute a proof for its existence. (*On Revolution* 209)

The myth that a free market is democratic is synonymous with the assumption that wealth is a byproduct of political freedom. This falsehood, however, does not originate in any political action, such as the American Revolution. Rather, the assumption is a consequence of the fact that early settlers happened to come across an abundance of natural wealth in America. The lack of natural wealth in the modern era, coupled with the rise of private enterprise, has in turn resulted not in wealth but in mass poverty. Free enterprise does not guarantee a better lifestyle for Americans, as the World's Fair of 1939 suggested. Furthermore, an unregulated market is not at all related to the rights which guarantee political freedom to American citizens. These rights, which Arendt suggests are freedom of assembly, thought, speech, and association, are far more fundamental to a democracy than freedom of enterprise in an unregulated market. Most importantly, Arendt suggests that freedom of enterprise actually cannot guarantee or testify to any other political freedom.

An unregulated market is not only unrelated to the values of democracy, but it can actually lead to antidemocratic relations of power. The changing landscape of the American market in the mid-twentieth century resulted in an economic structure that favored the financially elite. The shift from a needs to desires based culture, as well as the lack of financial regulations, guaranteed those in private enterprise an abundance of wealth. As a result, American consumers lost freedom of choice in the buying process and freedom from the constricting power of the affluent. Contrary to what the 1939 World's Fair predicted the World of Tomorrow to look like, “unhappiness and mass poverty” ensued (209).

How does a product change in a needs or desires based culture? What effect does this change have on the political realm? In *The Human Condition* Arendt examines the objects that make up the human artifice. By distinguishing use objects from consumer goods, Arendt is able to critique their conflation in modern times (HC 124). Ultimately, treating use-objects as consumer goods is destructive to the public realm and replaces the role of the citizen with that of the consumer.

The Human Condition makes a clear distinction between products of work and products of labor. Products of work, for Arendt, are objects that “...transcend the life-span of mortal men” (55). Use-objects are therefore defined by their durability (137). The result of products of work is that they contribute to the human artifice, which is foundational to the political realm. Products of labor, contrary to products of work, do not contribute to the human artifice. They are valued in so far as they can be consumed (137). An ideal example of a product of labor would be food. These consumptive objects are

necessitated by life, but do not contribute to the stability of the public realm. Ultimately, products of labor are valued in so far as they can be destroyed while products of work are valued in so far as they endure continual usage.

Maser's description of a desires-based culture demands the conflation of use-objects with consumer goods. Rather than using a product until it can no longer contribute to the human artifice, Maser suggests a model where use-objects are used as quickly as consumer goods. In a desires based culture, objects are no longer valued in so far as they endure usage, but are valued in so far as they satiate a desire. The result of this is that "use objects [are treated] as though they are consumer goods, so that a chair or a table is ... consumed as rapidly as a dress and a dress used up almost as quickly as food" (Arendt *HC* 124). McMurtry's fictional free market stands free of advertising, and thus operates in a needs based culture. Therefore, a needs based culture upholds the distinguishing characteristics between use objects and consumer goods which Arendt describes.

For Arendt, products of work correlate to the public sphere while products of labor correlate to the the household, where the consumptive process takes place (22). The conflation of use-objects with consumer goods is synonymous with the conflation of public and private matters. Arendt describes this collapse between the public and the private as an "admission of household and housekeeping activities into the public realm" (45). In modern society, what was previously the concern of household has publicized itself into the body politic, and in turn truly political matters are only relevant in private.

The specific development of propaganda in mid twentieth century America, which served corporate rather than national interest, exemplifies the conflation of the private and public realms. The chief strategists of the 1939 World's Fair actively appealed to the private desires of Americans to manipulate public opinion. Curtis discusses how propaganda in mid-twentieth century America appealed to a specific part of the psyche, namely what Freud defined as the unconscious (Curtis 00:09:17). The unconscious is perhaps the most private part of oneself. In so far as the concern of the private self became a public matter, public life became limited to satiating their private desires. The result of this was that public life for the American citizen became defined by the products they purchased.

American advertisements throughout the later half of the twentieth century actively manipulated public opinion to increase sales. Shortly after the end of the World War II, Mosler Safe Co. ran an advertisement for a safe that could survive the atomic bomb (Fig. 2). From an Arendtian perspective, the advertisement embodies the conflation of the private and public realms. Political events, such as the dropping of an atomic bomb, find relevance not in political life but in the private sphere of the American household, where a consumer decides what products to purchase. The advertisement is a testament to how companies such as Mosler Safe Co. actively harnessed the conflation of private and public matters to their own economic profit.



Fig. 2. *The Mosler Safe Co.*

In the advertisement, an image of a Mosler safe is layered over an aerial photograph taken after America deployed the nuclear bomb “Little Boy” on the city of Hiroshima, Japan (Fig. 2). The original photograph, a material artifact of political relevance, is appropriated by Mosler Safe Co. to serve their financial interest. On the advertisement itself, the safe is depicted to be as large as, if not larger than, the mushroom cloud which rises over the city. This scale of the safe suggests its superiority over the bomb, its ability to endure the powerful devastation and destruction of nuclear warfare. A photograph representing the power of the American military is used to suggest the superiority of American products and wealth. The advertisement suggests that Americans can affirm their political superiority through the consumptive process. In this sense, the political self is defined in so far as it is sublimated into consumer goods. Both the 1939 World’s Fair and the Mosler Safe advertisement begin to paint a picture of a modern America that is concerning. If nothing else, they serve as a stark reminder of the importance of engaging with and questioning the world one lives in.

The development of advertising in the United States throughout the twentieth century fundamentally changed American society. The 1939 World's Fair encapsulates a larger campaign, strategized by Public Relations Councils, to redefine a free market as inherently democratic. The unregulated market complimented the societal shift from a needs to a desires based culture. As a result, the consumptive process was no longer considered a private matter, but a public concern. This development in American history should be of concern to the modern citizen. Both the 1939 World's Fair, as well as the Mosler Safe Co. advertisement, begin to paint the picture of a nation defined by consumerism. In this sense, it is not too far from the modern-day American reality. How can Americans come to re-relate with the world around them, beyond the process of consumption? The second chapter of this project will conduct a close reading of Arendt's *The Human Condition* to better understand the phenomenon of world alienation. In response to the rise of consumerism in America, and consequently an ever increasing alienation from the world around them, Americans must come to care for the world they live in again.

Chapter 2

World Alienation

When *The Human Condition* was first published in 1958, Hannah Arendt had been living in New York for over fifteen years. Arendt's early life consisted of completing a dissertation on St. Augustine, feeling persecution in Nazi Germany, being placed in a detention camp outside of Paris, and eventually immigrating to the United States (d'Entreves). Reflecting over the course of these events years later in an interview, Arendt leans back in her chair, lights a cigarette, and looks suspiciously at Gunter Gaus. He asks her if she feels an attachment, affinity, or love of some sort to an identifiable group, whether it be the Jews or the working class. Is she not politically sterile? Arendt responds: "If you confuse these things, if you bring love to the negotiating table, to put it bluntly, I find that fatal.... I find it apolitical. I find it wordless" ("Hannah Arendt" 00:53:16). This sharpness in Arendt's thought is prominent elsewhere in her comments on her own politics.

Despite her role as a public intellectual, Arendt constantly presumed the position of an outsider. As noted in her interview with Gunter Gaus, this role as an outsider, though it may be perceived by others as apolitical, was not a position indifferent to the world. In fact, from Arendt's perspective, to be an outsider is not apolitical at all. The contrast between her own personal disposition towards political activity and her career dedicated to political writing and thinking is, for Arendt, nothing more than "a birth defect" (*Responsibility* 10). Arendt described her own time as one when all matters of public importance were treated as if they could only remain important in so far as they

could remain private to the individual, and consequently what did appear in public took on a negative connotation (10). Caught in a political arena which complemented her own political shyness, Arendt's role in politics never stepped further than her commentaries from afar.

The Human Condition, although it is a book concerned with the political world, does not focus particularly on events specific to Arendt's lifetime. Despite the distance that the text takes from every-day politics, Arendt begins the book with one of the few commentaries she makes on the mid twentieth century. She notes how the current state of affairs "...is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness-- the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty-- seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (5). The decision to place the text in direct conversation with the 'thoughtlessness' which permeates Arendt's time hints at what Arendt views the necessity of the publication to be. It is precisely because of this thoughtlessness that the text prompts its readers to think (5).

In an era defined by its thoughtlessness, *The Human Condition* offers a 'reconsideration' from which readers will be able to 'think what they are doing' in the world. Arendt begins by stating her intentions very clearly:

...this book does not provide an answer. ... What I propose here in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. ... What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we

are doing. “What we are doing” is indeed the central theme of this book.

(5)

Central to the outcome of thought, for Arendt, is not providing direct answers. In order to prompt thought, it seems that *The Human Condition* inhabits the space in between a direct question and a given answer. The book’s original title, *Amor Mundi*, hints towards this concern for the world. *Amor mundi* translates to the love of the world, and it is for the love of this contaminated world that the book strives to prompt thought about it.

In these opening remarks of the text there is a noticeable intimacy between Arendt as an authorial figure and any given reader. The use of the first person singular to call upon the reader to reconsider the human condition *with* her heightens the sense of personality and urgency regarding the climate of thoughtlessness. What is more, Arendt does not ask the reader to ‘think about the news or the politics’ of their daily lives, but to think about ‘what we are doing’. What does this mean? Simply, the reader and the author are confronted with an intimacy about their shared ‘doings’ in the world. The world is what relates and is the shared concern of both Arendt and her reader. The opening statements implicate the reader in the considerations that follow, so that Arendt, in a sense, carries the reader with her towards the final moment of thought at the end of the text. In doing so, Arendt ultimately prompts the reader towards an understanding, rather than revealing a concrete meaning.

What lies in between the first lines where Arendt calls upon her readers to think and the beginning of a given thought is the book itself. This is quite literally true. A commentary regarding what the act of thinking actually entails is mentioned at the very

end of the text. Calling upon Cato, Arendt ends *The Human Condition* with a quote which characterizes thinking as an act where “Never is [man] more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself” (325). This commentary on thinking at the end of the text aligns itself with Arendt’s views on self- thinking in other essays, and places the text in an interesting position.² The *vita activa* becomes the subject of the text, rather than questioning the nature of thought itself. In this sense, the book is quite literally folded in between the moment where the reader is called upon to think, and the end where the act of thinking begins.

How, exactly, does Arendt illuminate “the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears” and thereby lead us to think about our world (*HC* 5)? In her “Reply to Eric Voegelin”, Arendt discusses her approach to writing *Origins of Totalitarianism*. From the description that she provides, it is clear that her approach to *The Human Condition* is strikingly similar. She writes that her intention “...was to discover the chief effects of totalitarianism and to analyze them in historical terms.... [and she says] that I did not write a history of totalitarianism... but [gave] a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism” (Arendt, *Reply* 401). Rather than beginning with the question of what totalitarianism is and approaching it as a singular manner, Arendt suggests that her focus was on the elements that, when combined, form a totalitarian regime.

² See “Thinking and Moral Considerations” in *Responsibility and Judgment* for more on self-thinking.

This statement can be used as a blueprint to better understand Arendt's method in *The Human Condition*. One might suggest that this text considers the human condition 'from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears'. Arendt does not write a history of the human condition, but rather gives a historical account of the elements that have led to 'what we are doing'. The very structure of the book makes clear what elements Arendt sees as 'crystallizing' into the modern era. Arendt investigates what she sees as three fundamental human activities: work, labor, and action (7). Arendt considers these elements in so far as they relate to the world of men and things.

In determining how these elements relate to the world, Arendt investigates the history and etymology of these terms. It is no coincidence that W.H. Auden uses "To Think What We Are Doing" as the title of his review of the book. Auden reminds us that we can never think "unless we can first agree about the meaning of the words we think with, which, in turn, requires that we become aware of what these words have meant in the past. ... *The Human Condition* [is] a re-examination of what we think we mean, what we actually mean and what we ought to mean when we use such words" (72). *The Human Condition* provides the material necessary to prompt thought and, as Auden suggests, the medium through which Arendt prompts her readers is words themselves. In a sense this is quite literal, but it also reflective of Arendt's methodology.

The subject of *The Human Condition*, unlike *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), of course, is the mysterious and lovable world. One might ask, however, what exactly is the world? What does it entail? Arendt introduces the concept of the world by stating:

This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (HC 52)

The world, for Arendt, should not be confused with nature or with the physical earth. The foundation of the world is ‘the human artifact’ which is the product of *homo faber*.

Elsewhere in *The Human Condition* Arendt describes *homo faber* at great length; he is a craftsman that contributes objects to the human artifice (91). However, the world does not refer to the relationship between man and the object of his craft. Rather, the world relates human beings to each other through the objects they share. In this sense the world exists in so far as men inhabit it together.

The world, as characterized by Arendt, provides a concrete space for the public experience to occur. In this sense the world is defined both spatially and experientially. The metaphor of the table that Arendt introduces captures the tangible, thing-quality that defines the world. To continue the metaphor, one cannot experience sitting at the table, or one cannot enter the public realm, without the table, or the world, itself. The world can be understood as a precursor to public experience. These two terms, the world and the public, remain separate for Arendt in the text. However their shared qualities show how

mutually dependent their definitions are in the text. The contingency of these two terms is so great that Arendt herself states that “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself” (52). The world, although it is where public experience takes place, is not politics per se. It is what is “shared” and of common interest to everyone.

Throughout her later life, Arendt’s conception of what the world is expands. Arendt is clear in *The Human Condition* that the foundation of the world is the work of *homo faber*, and it is the space where the phenomenon of appearing in public occurs. Years later she notes, however, that these definitive traits of the world are not exclusionary. In an interview, Arendt states:

Arendt: ... I live in the modern world, and obviously my experience is in and of the modern world. This, after all, is not controversial. But the matter of merely laboring and consuming is of crucial importance for the reason that a kind of wordlessness defines itself there too. Nobody cares any longer what the world looks like.

Gaus: “World” understood always as the space in which politics can originate.

Arendt: I comprehend it now in a much larger sense, as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable. In which arts appears, of course. In which all kinds of things appear. You remember that Kennedy tried to expand the public space quite decisively by inviting poets to the White House. So that all could belong to this space. (“What Remains?” 20)

Arendt's definition of the world becomes increasingly inclusive. The world includes works of art that are not tangible things, so that recited verse is as worldly as a table. The reference Arendt makes to the Kennedys' highlights this. However, it does not suggest that the President, or the governmental sphere, is the maker or creator of the world. The world simply consists of what is common to us all. Most importantly, the world includes anything that shows itself publicly.

The phenomenon of appearing in public is discussed in great depth in *The Human Condition*. Rather than defining the public realm as a concrete space, Arendt's conception of the public realm is more concerned with the phenomenon of appearing in public, and therefore can best be understood as an experience. Arendt states that the public realm is a space where men appear and are "seen and heard by everybody" (HC 50). Not only is the experience of entering the public realm that of being seen and being heard, but it also results in the assurance "of the reality of the world and ourselves" (50). Although her conception of the world and the public are different, they act in conjunction to "relate and separate men at the same time" (52).

Central to Arendt's conception of the public experience is the departure it assumes from private life. Throughout *The Human Condition*, Arendt continually contrasts the differences of the public and the private realm to help define each one. An example of this is when the text considers the private and the public from the standpoint of privacy. Arendt states that the difference between the public and the private is the "distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden" (72). While the

private realm is concerned with matters of the individual, the public realm is concerned with matters that interest the group at large. What is not of concern to the group does not therefore lose importance. In fact, the integrity of the private realm is of importance to Arendt. Arendt notes how “a life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. . . . It loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense” (HC 71). It is when one leaves the shadows of private life and appears in public that the public experience occurs.

Specifically, Arendt originates her conception of the private realm in the household. Private concerns are necessitated not by shared public interest, but by the fact of life itself. The individual maintenance of the body as well as the collective maintenance of the household are matters that are private to the individual and/or the family. The private realm is, in a sense, a shelter against the publicity of the world. Examples of matters that are private to Arendt are bodily pain or romantic love. Those things which “cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others” within the public realm proves them relevant only to the individual, but by no means suggests that “private concerns are generally irrelevant” (51). In fact, Arendt notes the very intense and rich experiences felt in “the intimacy of a fully developed private life” (50).

Pitkin confronts the easily unsettling realities that arise upon closer inspection of Arendt’s schema. Pitkin rightfully points out the difficulties of modeling a distinction between the political and the private after ancient Greece. Most obviously, anyone who

was not a land-owning male with status could not involve themselves in politics. If read as an idealization of this ancient divide, those eligible to participate in Arendt's own political world would be hyper masculine and admittedly comical. Pitkin describes men who, "unable to face their mortality and physical vulnerability, ... strive endlessly to be superhuman, and, realizing that they cannot achieve that goal, require endless reassurance from others in their anxious delusion" (Pitkin 272). Pitkin, while addressing Arendt's critics, questions if this reading is congruent with the rest of the text. Is this truly the political world that Arendt strives for?

Although Arendt does emphasize the ancient distinction to define her terms, she does not idealize the distinction or plead for a return to the old order. Her commentaries do, however, make use of history in order to inform an understanding of the present. Helpful in understanding the schema that Arendt creates is to consider the text as descriptive, rather than perspective. Arendt's lack of concrete language could easily lead one to try to read her more and more literally. If we remember that the public realm, though contrasted and at times highly sympathetic to the *polis* in ancient Greece, is not actually a tangible place but rather a phenomenon which occurs in the ever-fluctuating world, then the question of the distinction between the private and the public changes. The question, in turn, becomes a question of the relationship between the private and the public world. What occurs when the self comes out of the shadows and appears in the world with others? These two different components of an individual's existence, both the private and the public, pose an interesting question for readers: "How shall we understand ourselves as simultaneously both private and public beings?" (Pitkin 283).

Pitkin points out how in her formulations of the divide between the private and the public, Arendt was “after self-development and not self-display; her goal was the “actualization” of the actor’s “latent self”” (Pitkin 276). Central to Arendt's conception of the public is both speech and action. The public realm allows for “the self-realization of a not yet completed person—self-realization in both senses of that word: making actual what is potential in the person and coming to realize who one really is” (Pitkin 283). Through both speaking and acting, a given person enters the world and partakes in the public realm (Arendt, *HC* 50). Both speech and action allow for the self to be actualized. The relationship of the private realm to the public realm becomes clear. Private and intimate emotions are private in so much as they belong solely to the individual. However, it is exactly these private experiences take on a new reality when brought into the public realm (50). Ultimately, both the private realm and the public realm are necessary for the actualization of the self.

Arendt’s concept of self actualization in the public realm originates from her reading of Aristotle (206). While Aristotle saw the height of “actuality” as being achieved through thought and contemplation, Arendt notes this as irrelevant, as *The Human Condition* is concerned with the *vita activa*, not the *vita contemplativa*. The actualization of the self in the *vita activa* finds its highest order in action and speech. This is directly opposed in the text to the mindset of both *homo faber* and *animal laborans*, who operate within a means/end mindset. The value of the public realm, for Arendt, is distinguished because it allows for...

... these instances of action and speech [where] the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself which therefore becomes an *entelecheia*, and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is imbedded in it; the performance is the work, is *energeia*. In other words, the means to achieve the end would already be the end; and this “end,” conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself. (206/7)

The actualization of the self is the value of appearing in public. When one leaves the shadows of private life and appears in the light of public, their speech and actions are values in themselves.

Additionally, when men appear in public they “show who they are, reveal[ing] actively their unique personal identities” (179). Arendt borrows the concept of the ancient Greek *daimon* to formulate her understanding of self disclosure in the public realm. The *daimon* is described as a little monster (a harmless monster) that rests on each persons shoulder and is unique to each person (179). In order to better develop the concept of the *daimon* within her considerations, Arendt juxtaposes the ‘who’ to the ‘what’ of a person:

This disclosure of ‘who’ [is] in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed

and could dispose of this 'who' in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. (Arendt, *HC* 179).

In her description of the public realm, Arendt emphasizes the importance of 'appearance' and 'distinction'. It seems that the quality most important to public 'appearance' is the *daimon*, this 'who' also makes the individual 'distinct' from everyone else. Specific to the *daimon* is that only others are able to see it, and its identity is undisclosed to the person them self. The unique quality of the *daimon* is not in the control of each individual who possesses it. Although Arendt notes that it can remain hidden, it ultimately is realized not through the self but through others. It is this 'who' that gives meaning to appearance in the public realm.

In *The Human Condition* the social realm is characterized by the conflation of private and public realms and the subsequent contamination of public values such as action and speech. As a result, what priorly gave value to the public realm is lost and the social arena is filled with propaganda and violence in lieu of authentic speech and action. In the modern era, Arendt notes how "...our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and private" (49). Arendt describes the social realm as the collapse of both the private and public realms. Arendt describes this collapse between the public and the private as an "admission of household and housekeeping activities into the public realm" (45). In other words, what was previously the concern of the household has been publicized into the body politic. In turn, truly public matters, such as action and speech, only remain relevant in private.

How does this effect the *daimon*, on our shoulders that wishes to show itself to others? Arendt states:

Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. ... In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech becomes indeed “mere talk”, simply one more means towards the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing, disclosure comes only from the deed itself, and this achievement, like all other achievements, cannot disclose the “who,” the unique and distinct identity of the agent. (180)

It is not individuality at large which is placed at risk under the social, but specifically the “character” which distinguishes speech and action as unique to the agent. Speech in the social realm consists of “mere talk”, and lacks all meaning. Furthermore, both speech and action become “one more means towards the end” and are contaminated by an instrumental mindset, that of the *homo faber* (228). This is contrasted to the self-actualization in speech and action which is the marker of value in a common public world.

In this new social realm that conflates previous distinctions between public and private life, the distinct trait of individuality which is found when one appears in public suffers. While the metaphorical table of the public demands that individuals sit around, the social realm is concerned with sameness. As she describes the social, Arendt writes:

The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic seance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two person sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (Arendt, *HC* 53)

The disappearance of the table is, first and foremost, a reference to the table as initially described as a metaphor for the public realm and the world. Therefore, this description represents a disappearance of the public realm. In society, men are no longer “related and separated” through appearing in the public realm.

The development of the society in modern times ultimately results in the phenomenon of mass loneliness (59). Central to the social realm is the fact that it destroys “...both the public realm and the private realm, [thereby depriving] men not only of their place in the world but of their own private home” (59). Arendt here suggests that when the public realm is lost, men are not suddenly thrown back into their own private life. Instead, without a home or public, man is faced with a “...loneliness [that] consists [of] being thrown back upon oneself” (“*What Remains?*” 21). This loneliness is characteristic to the “...state of affairs [when] consumption takes the place of all the truly relating activities” (21). One can imagine how this feeling of loneliness might be like the feeling of being in a room with others, but completely unable to relate to or differentiate oneself from them. When the consumption of objects replaces the act of relating to others in the public realm, such as was the case of mid-twentieth century in America, man loses his place in both the world and his home.

The phenomenon of loneliness, which is the result of being thrown back on oneself, is the byproduct of world alienation. Arendt suggests that it is alienation from a common world, rather than alienation of the self, that is the trademark of modern society (*HC* 254). She states,

One of the most persistent trends in modern philosophy since Descartes... has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person of man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself. ... World alienation, not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age. (*HC* 254)

Arendt suggests that it is an alienation from the world, rather than an alienation of the self, that constitutes the modern era. In order for the self to be realized, or to have ones *daimon* show itself, men must appear in the world. Mans relationship to the world is of utmost importance to Arendt, which is precisely why at the beginning of *The Human Condition* she asks her readers to consider the world around them (5). In order to combat world alienation, men must "...think what [they] are doing, and take charge of the history in which [they] are all constantly engaged by drift and inadvertence" (Pitkin 279). It is by caring for the world that one becomes less alienated from it.

The critique of the social realm in *The Human Condition* is applicable to America during the mid-twentieth century. Although Arendt does not explicitly reference American society in the text, she does characterize the rise of the social realm as distinctive to the modern world. Specifically to America, the development of propaganda

embodies a collapse of the public and private realms. A symptom of this collapse is the rise of social sciences. Arendt suggests that "...the rise of the behavioral sciences indicates ... when mass society has devoured all strata of the nation" (45). This is exemplified in the United States when Edward Bernays appropriated the social sciences to control public opinion. Likewise, the conflation of use-objects with consumer-goods lent itself to the development of the social realm. If the work of *homo faber* contributes durable use-objects the world, then the replacement of use-objects with consumer goods threatens the stability of the world (125). The value of use objects, which is their durability, is antithetical to the value of consumer goods, which is their consumption. To care about the world is to care about the very objects which relate all men to each other.³ The increase of labor and thereby consumption in modern times is contrary to the values of the world, and therefore it destructive to the world. Ultimately American citizens became increasingly alienated from the world around them.

It is precisely because of the importance of the world that Arendt dedicates *The Human Condition* to investigating the elements of *vita activa*. When Gunter Gaus asks Arendt if she does not feel love for any group, her hesitance to "bring love to the negotiating table" is a resistance to the social realm itself ("Hannah Arendt" 00:53:16). To base political action on personal emotions is to conflate the public with the personal.

³ Arendt states in her interview with Gunter Gaus that "nobody cares any more what the world looks like" ("Hannah Arendt" 00:53:16) . It is of importance here to note that this it is not a subtly racist comment suggesting that politicians must control who does or does not find voice politically. The comment refers to the the objects which make up the world, not the people. The importance of these objects, however, is not aesthetic. For Arendt, one must recognize the distinction between use objects and consumer goods and the effect they have on the world.

Love, in so much as it is a personal feeling, is therefore anti-political (Arendt, *HC* 242). To conflate the personal with the political complements the rise of the social, and thereby lacks concern for the world. How can one come to re-relate to a world they are increasingly alienated from? The third chapter of this project looks at the work of Robert Lowell and W.H. Auden to suggest that poetry is a means through which we can relate, and care for, the world around them.

Chapter III

Poetry in the World

Robert Lowell and W.H. Auden had their differences. While Auden continually struggled with and recanted the political implications of his work, Lowell actively harnessed his public image as a poet to comment on the political realm.⁴ What both poets shared was a country defined by capitalism, consumerism, and nuclear warfare. The phenomenon of world-alienation in twentieth century America complicated the role of the poet in the world. If one assumes poetry's inherent affinity with the interior self, in so much as it excludes the exterior world, then a given poem only further alienates both the poet and the reader from their surroundings. Despite their varying attitudes towards politics, mid-century American poets such as Auden and Lowell produced poems that suggested this wasn't true. Their poems are worldly things. Their verse stands testament to the power of poetry to re-relate men to the world around them, and ultimately combat the phenomenon of world alienation.

In most anthologies of American literature, Lowell's poems have found their place alongside the work of other writers associated with the Confessional school. Scholars have noted that to categorize Lowell strictly with other Confessional writers, however, may be a decision blindly influenced by the mental health problems he suffered from throughout life (Thurston 143). Similar to other Confessional poets, the voice of an interior self is often prominent in Lowell's writing. Beyond this categorization, Lowell

⁴ Auden's "September 1st 1939" in which he depicts the artist as an educator to the public. Auden later recanted the poem and this statement (Mendelson 75-76). To the contrary, Lowell harnesses his reputation as a well known poet to publicly declines LBJ's invitation to the White House as an act of protest against the Vietnam War.

and his peers “wrote poems that asked who and what and when to trust” in response to the events of the Second World War (Burt 138). Given his politics, remembering Lowell as a ‘political poet’ is easy. *For the Union Dead* (1964) is a stellar example of poetry that directly engages with public concerns. But to claim that Lowell is a ‘political poet’ limits the value of his work. The questions which are provoked from his poems, whether they concern trust, politics, love, or war, stretch beyond their political implications and engage with the world.

In *For the Union Dead*, Lowell specifically focuses on political issues. Must a poem directly engage with political concerns in order to be a part of the world? Is a commentary on the political realm a condition for a given poem's worldliness? Unlike Lowell, Auden claimed his work as apolitical. However, this claim does not exclude his poetry from the world. The work of both poets not only engages with the effects of world alienation in America during the later half of the twentieth century, but actively combat the phenomena of world alienation by re-relating the reader to the world around them.

How is a poem understood in relation to the world? Is the task of the poet to offer a private, personal narrative or a public, historical account? “For the Union Dead” directly engages with the public concerns without negating the interiority self in the voice of the narrator. Lowell writes, “I sigh often still / for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile...” describing a loss of national pride. In this sense, “For the Union Dead” is at once both a personal and public narrative. On a larger scale, the poem confronts the public history of Colonel Shaw. Simultaneously, Lowell's ancestral relations to Shaw suggest the text could be read as a family elegy (Axelrod 121, 123).

“For The Union Dead” cannot be limited to either a personal or political account, and suggests that the poet does not have to abandon the private to comment on the world.

Much of the book *For the Union Dead* can be read as a lamentation for a world, rather a country, that is no longer cared for. The whole of the book *For the Union Dead* confronts the unsettling realities of an individual in a world defined by advertisements, construction, and nuclear warfare. Throughout the text, the citizens of Lowell's dead Union are increasingly estranged from the world. The book reflects over entire seasons spent under the “chafe and jar / of nuclear war ...” and an entire nation where citizens have “talked [their] extinction to death” (Lowell “Fall 1961” 6- 7). Elsewhere, a man is unable to “discover America by counting / the chains of condemned freight-trains / from thirty states...” (“The Mouth of the Hudson” 5-7). The characteristics of modern America, especially nuclear warfare and mass industry, only further alienate the individual from the world around them.

The loss of care for the world which permeates the entire book of poetry culminates in “For the Union Dead”, where this loss is specified to the diminishing glory of modern America. “For the Union dead” engages with the story of Colonel Shaw’s regiment during the Civil War to highlight the failures of modern America. Colonel Shaw’s death came to embody a “capacity for idealism and courage” not only to New Englanders but to America at large (122). “For the Union Dead” depicts an America which conspicuously lacks the hope that characterized the work of James Russell Lowell. While the Union was able to find hope despite the tragic fate of Colonel Shaw’s regiment, Lowell depicts an America which lacks any hope after the mass casualties of World War

II. In the text, the previous idealism of the Union cause has been replaced by a modern nightmare. The vision of America Lowell paints is defined by technological advances, consumerism, and nuclear warfare. The Union is pronounced by Lowell to be dead.

The death of the Union is apparent in the opening stanza of the poem, as Lowell relates America to an abandoned aquarium. The physical structure of the “old South Boston Aquarium” stands emptied of life and movement. The cod statue outside of the Aquarium, like the slimming statue of Shaw mentioned later in the poem, has “lost half its scales” (“Union” 3). The life of the aquarium has been replaced by machines to create more “parking spaces” (“Union” 17). Although the original structure of the aquarium still stands, it is described in a state of ruin. Likewise, although the American nation still stands the livelihood, or pride, of the nation is gone.

Lowell depicts a modern America where consumer habits constitute the public realm. In the poem's descriptions commercial spaces and political spaces are conflated with one another. Lowell writes,

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.

A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse, ... (Lowell 70)

Here, parking spaces take on political value when they are described as “civic” and constituting the ‘heart’ of Boston. What is of concern is that parking spaces are a result of the rise of industry and consumerism, not the byproduct of a developing public realm. In this industrial landscape the girders become ‘puritan pumpkin’, somehow embodying

American qualities. The public life of the city becomes inseparable from both industry and consumerism.

Lowells commentaries in the poem on the loss of military glory, as well as the loss of the public realm to the rise of consumerism, respond to a specific political reality. The acts of racial violence which dominated American politics throughout the 1960s shadows over the entirety of the poem. The poem ends,

There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the “Rock of Ages”
that survived the past. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like
balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

For Shaw's father, the glorification of the Union cause was able to override racial tensions. Lowell's reference to the schoolchildren suggests that he is unable to find this same capacity for reconciliation in modern times.

The narrative surrounding Shaw's historical past in turn comments on the historical present. The dignity which once defined America during the Civil War is now lost to commercialization, nuclear warfare, and racial violence. The most recent war to which the poem refers is unable to merit the same memorialization as the Civil War once did. Instead the victims of Hiroshima are not remembered, but used for the financial interest of Mosler Safe Co. Will the break that the statue of Shaw waits for ever come? Perhaps not. The old Boston aquarium, symbolic of America, is gone. Faced with the hope that defined the Union cause during the Civil War, Lowell is unable to find hope for the modern cause.

With Arendt's description of world-alienation in mind, "For the Union Dead" can be read as confronting the world in a time defined by commercialization, nuclear warfare, and racial violence. The mentioning of the Mosler Safe advertisement directly confronts the phenomena of world-alienation which characterizes the modern age. The poet becomes capable of re-appropriating a piece of propaganda, and in doing so is able to directly change the meaning it has for the public. Lowell mentions material artifacts of the world to comment on the world. The Mosler safe advertisement is no longer used to form consumer habits against the populous, but instead serves as a stark reminder of the modern world. Insofar as the poem relates to the world of men and things, the poem is actively realizing its inherent relation to the mid-century American world which

surrounds it. Because all poems are inherently public, in an Arendtian sense, Lowell is able to harness the appearance of this poem in the public realm to highlight the unsettling realities of the present age.

Similar to Lowell, Auden's poetry confronts the phenomena of world alienation in America throughout the mid-twentieth century. While Lowell's *For the Union Dead* confronts the political realities at the time, ranging from nuclear warfare to racial violence, Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" (1939) explores the loss of individuality in the social realm. In Lowell's more perfect union, the private matter of memorialization was a decision made by the family, namely Shaw's father ("Union" 42). In Auden's modern social realm, the private decision of memorialization has become a public concern, and over the grave of the individual in question stands a "monument erected by the state" ("The Unknown Citizen" 1). Both *For The Union Dead* as well as "The Unknown Citizen" offer the reader a understanding of the condition of the modern world.

"The Unknown Citizen" provides a picture of a man who has exclusively been identified through social institutions. However, all of the qualities given about the individual are unable to truly identify who he is. Auden writes,

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
 One against whom there was no official complaint,
 And all the reports on his conduct agree
 That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
 For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
 Except for a War till the day he retired
 He worked in a factory and never got fired,

But satisfied his employed, Fudge Motors Inc.
 Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
 For his Union reports that he payed his dues,
 (Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
 And our Social Psychology workers found
 That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
 The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
 And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
 Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
 And his Health-card shows he was once in a hospital but left it cured.
 He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan
 And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
 A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
 Our researches into Public Opinion are content
 That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
 When there was peace, he was for peace, when there was war, he went.
 He was married and added five children to the population,
 Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his
 generation,
 And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
 Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
 Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

The social institutions which define the individual include, but are not limited, to
 advertisements, correct opinions, and education. Yet these 'characteristics' leave the
 reader feeling even more estranged from the individual at hand. This lack of individual
 traits mentioned in the poem is mirrored in the narration of the poem itself, where the

voice of the man in question remains absent. Most obviously, the name of the man is never given, and upon his death he remains an unknown citizen.

From an Arendtian perspective, the descriptions provided in “The Unknown Citizen” are solely concerned with the ‘what’ of the man’s life. Consequently, this has suffocated the ‘who’ which makes a given person unique. This reading of the poem does not suggest that the poet simply is unable to capture the ‘who’ of a given person. Rather, through the poem Auden is appropriating the language of the state to reveal its own shortcomings. Auden’s decision to leave the character unnamed only complements the message of the poem: in the thriving society of modern times, the distinct uniqueness of a person can no longer be identified.

This inability to for uniqueness of an individual to be recognized in modern society is exemplified on a smaller scale in the poem. The first two lines of Auden’s poem begin as such: “He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be / One against whom there was no official complaint” (“The Unknown Citizen” 1-2). If the first line is read independently, the question of how one comes “to be” is answered by the Bureau, or the state. Furthermore, the sentence structure within the first two lines is completely passive, negating the active voice of the narrator. From the perspective of social institutions, the citizen described did everything right. If this is the case, then why is Auden’s description so concerning? The ending of the poem illustrates how detrimental modern society is to the individual. Stripped of ones voice, only spoken about through massive social institutions, the “we” which defines the modern self is unable to find any freedom or happiness. The voice of a given person becomes silenced within the narrative of the state.

This inadequacy for individuality to show itself in the social realm is also present elsewhere in Auden's work. In "September 1st 1939", Auden describes the phenomena of world alienation from a different perspective. While "The Unknown Citizen" adopted the voice of the state to comment on the diminishing voice of the individual in modern society, "September 1st 1939" adopts the voice of the individual attempting to reconcile with the modern world.

The first stanza of "September 1st 1939" presents a darkening image of a world defined by war. The poem begins, "I sit in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second Street/ Uncertain and afraid." Here, the self is present against a tundra of devastating political events, namely the beginning of the World War II. The beginning of the second world war poses a moral dilemma for the individual. Auden writes,

I and the public know
 What all schoolchildren learn,
 Those to whom evil is done
 Do evil in return.

The individual is thus confronted with how to reconcile with the outbreak of war. Should one turn to the knowledge of revenge that all schoolchildren know? This knowledge which rationalizes warfare belongs neither solely to the individual or the public. As a result, when the voice of the individual does question the world around them, they are unable to locate a moral center. Against the backdrop of war, Auden forces his readers to question the moral validity of the seemingly harmless phrase that has been justified even to those as innocent as schoolchildren.

As the poem continues, Auden continues to confront his readers with the question of reconciliation. In his verse Auden suggests that perhaps the difficulty of reconciliation lies in the fact that men are not inherently good.

Faces along the bar
 Cling to their average day:
 The lights must never go out,
 The music must always play,
 All the conventions conspire
 To make this fort assume
 The furniture of home;
 Lest we should see where we are,
 Lost in a haunted wood,
 Children afraid of the night
 Who have never been happy or good.

In this stanza, Auden describes the patrons of the bar in a desperate mentality, reaching for the facade of music and lighting that may resemble a home in a world defined by war, where everywhere is now a fort. Auden harnesses his authorial power here to suggest that although the bar patrons may be unable, they should recognize the state of the world around them. Auden then relies on symbolic imagery to suggest that if were one to look, they would see themselves in a dark and haunted forest. The children who once claimed the knowledge of revenge are now lost, unable to reconcile themselves with the world around them.

“September 1st 1939” suggests that in the haunted wood of humanity the poets role is to guide, or to remind, those who cannot see what is actually there. The narrator

directly asks those citizens who, in fact, can help? (“September 1st 1939” 74-77). The answer to this question is the poet. The second to the last stanza in the poem states:

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,
 The romantic lie in the brain
 Of the sensual man-in-the-street
 And the lie of Authority
 Whose buildings grope the sky:
 There is no such thing as the State
 And no one exists alone;
 Hunger allows no choice
 To the citizen or the police;
 We must love one another or die.

The individual voice of the poet rises up in a world defined by silent, unknown citizens.

The role of the poet is to distinguish truth from lies, to stand in opposition to the authority, to recognize the falsehoods of the state, and thus to provide moral guidance.

While the opening stanzas described uncertainty and fear, as the poem comes to an end the poet is able to provide a statement of clarity. The statement “we must love each other or die” suggests the moral responsibility of the poet to educate the public.

Is it this quality of the poet, the ability to provide clarity in an age of uncertainty, what allows them to engage with the world? Are both Lowell and Auden worldly poets in so far as they have the ability to shed light on what others cannot see? When Lowell appropriates the Mosler Safe Co. advertisement in “For the Union Dead” he is able to depict the unsettling nature on the advertisement in a new way. Likewise, when Auden appropriates the voice of social institutions in “The Unknown Citizen” he is able to reveal

the inability of the State to define the individual. But it is exactly this view of the poet as savior that caused Auden to recant “September 1st 1939” after it was published (Mendelson 73). To suggest that the poet is a savior assumes a “faith in a just inevitable future” (74). As pleasant as this view of the poet may be, it actually misunderstands the work of both Auden and Lowell.

Neither Auden nor Lowell conceived of the poet as a savior to the public, or provided a particularly hopeful vision of the future. The development in Auden's thinking that led him to trust neither the poet nor the future is apparent throughout the progression of his writing. Mendelson reads “September 1st 1939” in relation to Auden’s elegy for Freud, published later that year. In the poem Auden writes,

One rational voice is dumb: over a grave
 The household of Impulse mourns one deeply loved.
 Sad is Eros, builder of cities,
 And weeping anarchic Aphrodite. (“In Memory” 102)

Mendelson notes how in “September 1st 1939” the statement “we must love each other or die” suggested that “...love could conquer death. Now, over the grave of her dead beloved, Aphrodite, goddess of love, stood weeping” (88). For Auden, poetry does not in fact have the capacity to save a morally corrupt society. Likewise, the assumption that the poet can save the public assumes a hope for the future that is not present in Lowell's work.

In a review of *For the Union Dead*, Parkinson offers a reading of the book that shows the extent to which Lowell is unable to reconcile himself with the world around him. Rather than laying the groundwork for a hopeful political vision of the future,

Parkinson suggests the poems “are of a world that has denied its second and would deny a third chance” of recovery, and in turn, the book inhabits a world without a God figure at all (145). Both the work of Auden and W.H. refuse to provide a hopeful answer in response to the concerns of the modern era.

Recognizing the inability of poetry to provide a hopeful answer for the public, Parkinson earnestly questions the role of the poet and the poems themselves in the world:

The frantic anti-humanism of many of our best and most admired classics come from this struggle to transcend a society controlled by the very worst of the merely human motives, the principle of greed. Moral resistance against this is very fine, and Lowell holds the hard-earned position of being one of our primary moral consciousnesses. ... The question is whether the poems are equal rebukes to the order, if we can call it that, of a society that makes even Johnson seem sometimes adequate. (149)

Can the poems really offer an ‘equal rebuke’ to the age which they so clearly despise?

Parkinson here notes the phenomenon of greed, which is sympathetic to an understanding of the rise of consumerism in America at this time. If the marker of a consumerist age is world alienation for Lowell and moral ambiguity for Auden, then perhaps the question is not so directly about moral resistance.

Although the question of “moral resistance” is what Parkinson decides to focus his argument around, many of his concerns for the modern age are markers not of moral ambiguity but of world alienation. Elsewhere he comments on the how the poetry of Lowell in this book mourns the capacity for action, stating that “in... *For the Union*

Dead (insofar as it participates in the merely confessional mode) the age of anxiety evolves into an age of panic and ultimately helplessness. Action in Lowell's book becomes possible only in memory personal and historical; elegiac separation from experience, from doing anything about it, is the norm" (150). This lack of authentic public action is overall sympathetic to the loss of a relationship to the world. Like Lowell's *For the Union Dead*, Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" similarly depicts a loss of individuality in the public realm. If these works are viewed as confronting the world in an age of world-alienation, then the question that Parkinson poses in his review changes. One then asks if these poems actually have the capacity to rebuild one's relationship with the world around them.

For Parkinson, this question extends beyond Lowell's individual struggle of reconciliation within this collection of poems. It is a question regarding the role of literature in society at large. Parkinson answers by stating that:

Lowell himself, in his incidental comments and interviews, has remarked on the danger that lies in the American sensibility, and in his own, in wanting total drastic solutions to the human condition. These poems, however, present a human condition to which there is no solution. All literature does. (151)

The capacity of literature, and especially of Lowell in this case, to "present a [vision] of the human condition to which there is no solution" is one of the markers of the very greatness of the art form itself. In Lowell's vision in "For the Union Dead" and Auden's

statements, the question that is provoked by literature cannot be answered by literature itself.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt views poetry from the standpoint of the world and comments on poetry in so much as it relates to the world. As noted previously, the things which make up Arendt's world, which is the basis of the public realm, are defined by their durability. It is in relation to this standard of durability that she comments on poetry. However, Arendt acknowledges artwork in the *vita activa* by noting how it defies the standards of other use-objects and must be “removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world” (167). She states that the durability of works of art is “of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages” (167). Unlike use objects or consumer goods, a piece of artwork can outlive generations of audiences, viewers, or readers. While food may decay and eventually a table breaks down after use, the life of a given poem is seemingly endless. Arendt suggests it is this wondrous capacity for poems to remain a part of the human artifice that leads Arendt to comment that “in the case of art works... it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames” (168). The work of art is distinguished from other objects within the *vita activa*. This statement makes clear that the work of art, for Arendt, transcends the qualitative standards of other objects in the world.

Artwork can be understood in the world in so far that it appears in public and therefore interacts with Arendt's concept of the phenomenon of appearing. In describing

the wondrous nature of durability which a piece of artwork possesses, Arendt's language is reminiscent of her descriptions of the public realm. In *The Human Condition* she states that the work of art is a...

...premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sounds and to be heard, to speak and to be read. (168)

Like a given person's experience of appearing in public, pieces of artwork are "seen" and "heard" by others. Thus the value of artwork in the world is simply found in its very appearance in the public realm. Although Arendt considers the work of art to be of a higher order, it does in fact appear in public. In this sense, the work of art becomes a public object.

This specific value of the artwork, which is gained upon appearing in public, is reminiscent of Arendt's commentaries on the individual entering the public realm in so far as its value necessitates the other. The interaction with a reader or a viewer is essential, for Arendt, to the durability which separates pieces of art from other objects in the *vita activa*. For Arendt, a poem unread enters into a realm of deadness, "a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it" (169). The living reader gives life to the words they read, and in this sense the poem appears to the other. The value of the text in the world necessitates the other. Likewise, the value of the an individuals appearance in the public realm relies

on the presence of others. The act of reading or writing a poem is an inherently world-building activity; it gives life not only to the text but also to the world.

Arendt describes the creation of the poem as similar to the phenomenon of appearing in public. The artist's private experience is encapsulated in a work of art and then shown to others. Although the piece of artwork does come out of the shadows of private existence into public light, the root of all artwork for Arendt is thought itself. She writes,

Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage transforms the desperate longing of needs—until they are fit to enter the world and to be transformed into things, to become reified” (168).

The transition from feeling to thought is essential to the building of a common world. Ultimately, the work of art for Arendt becomes a “thought-thing” in the world of men (169). Thought, for Arendt, is how her readers can come to care for the world around them. This is suggested in the opening of the text, when Arendt calls upon her readers to think in an age defined by “thoughtless-ness” (5). Poetry inherently relates to the world in so far as it is a thought-thing. In this sense, a poem is a means through which one can engage with and care for the world.

Faced with a society defined by propaganda, consumerism, and nuclear warfare, poems very well could be unable to save us. And perhaps we should not ask them to. However, to deny poetry a political capacity does not inherently deny its worldly quality. Something as simple as a poem can, in fact, actively re-relate a reader to a world that they

are increasingly alienated from. Poetry is by nature an exercise in *amor mundi*, a way to care about the world. In a world characterized by a lack of care for it, this aspect of poetry is easily unappreciated. But if we once again learn to value and to love the world of men and things, this understated value of poetry may just be enough.

List of Abbreviations

HC: *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt

“Union”: “For the Union Dead” Robert Lowell

“In Memory” : “In Memory of Sigmund Freud” W.H. Auden

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